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A NEW SOURCE FOR LARKIN'S 'POETRY OF DEPARTURES'

When Archie Burnett's edition of Philip Larkin's Complete Poems was published in 2012, it provided Larkin's readers with more detailed annotations than any previous edition.¹ Many of the sources of Larkin's poetry were identified for the first time, and it became possible to see how he had drawn on and transformed the writers who influenced him. Nonetheless, there are sources that remain to be identified: this note supplies one of them. Larkin's poem 'Poetry of Departures' was written in January 1954 and published in Poetry and Audience that June before being reprinted in two other magazines and collected in The Less Deceived the following year. John Osborne identifies Somerset Maugham's novel The Moon and Sixpence as a source for 'much of the spirit and certain of the motifs' of the poem.² This note will suggest another source: Christopher Isherwood's first novel, All the Conspirators (1928).³

The poem begins by quoting something 'you hear, fifth-hand, / As epitaph' (1-2), marking the direct speech with italics: '*He chucked up everything / And just cleared off*' (3-4). Later on, this is recapitulated in the line '*He walked out on the whole crowd*' (17). In the context of the poem, it is easy to imagine that these are

¹ Philip Larkin, The Complete Poems, edited by Archie Burnett (London: Faber, 2012). All quotations from Larkin's poetry are from this edition.

² John Osborne, Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction (2008), p. 55.

³ Christopher Isherwood, All the Conspirators (London: Magnum, 1980).

generic expressions, like the later italicised phrases '*Then she undid her dress*' and '*Take that you bastard*' (19-20), which similarly leave the speaker 'flushed and stirred' (18). In fact, however, they are closely modelled on key passages in Isherwood's novel. The novel's central character, Philip, quits his job and his home leaving a note that says 'I've decided to chuck everything up' (p. 38). 'Do you mean you'd cleared out –?' another character asks him (p. 106). Larkin does not use the expressions 'chucked up' or 'cleared off' (or 'out') elsewhere in his poetry.⁴

Larkin was intimately familiar with Isherwood's work as a whole, and this novel in particular. Only D.H. Lawrence was more important to the young Larkin as a prose writer, in the period when Larkin still aspired to become a novelist himself. Larkin knew Isherwood's writing by 1940, when he was eighteen, and mentions him regularly in his letters.⁵ When Kingsley Amis borrowed his copy of All the Conspirators in 1942 and was slow to return it, Larkin resorted first to a series of capitalised postscripts ('SEND ALL THE CONSPIRATORS YOU FLARING BALLOCK YOU' (p. 46)) and then to telling Amis 'seriously': 'That book is a book I value highly; I read it on an average once a month. Due to you I have been deprived of it for nearly 5 months. *I want it!!* Understand?' (p. 47). By July 1943, Larkin would claim to have 'absorbed (I think) the literature of my early days – Auden, Isherwood, & Lawrence' and to 'read them occasionally' (p. 59). But Isherwood was also on Larkin's mind just before he started work on 'Poetry of

⁴ R.J.C. Watt, ed., A Concordance to the Poetry of Philip Larkin (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1995).

⁵ Philip Larkin, Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1992), p. 4. All quotations from Larkin's letters are from this edition.

Departures' in January 1953: he is mentioned in passing in a letter the previous November (p. 218). (By contrast, Larkin described Somerset Maugham in 1941 as a 'Shite [...] juggling with "richly brocaded" words' (p. 17); Maugham is not mentioned again in the Selected Letters until 1973.)

It is easy to see the attractions All the Conspirators held for Larkin. The novel relates the story of a young man named Philip with ambitions to write and paint, who struggles to escape the stifling atmosphere of his bourgeois home and the demands of his day job in the City. Philip's desire to pursue his vocation as an artist and writer puts him at odds with his manipulative mother and his sister, who attempts her own form of escape through an ill-advised engagement. While Philip's Kensington home was a long way from Larkin's upbringing in Coventry, Larkin likely saw aspects of himself in Philip's difficult family situation, his acute consciousness of his family's (relative) lack of money, his difficulty combining a writing life with the need to make a living, and his desire to escape a deadening, claustrophobic sense of conformity. At the same time, he might have responded to Isherwood's scepticism about Philip's grand gesture, which, at the end of the novel, produces only a hollow victory and no significant work of art.

Many of these concerns are present in 'Poetry of Departures', which takes the plot of All the Conspirators as its starting point, and sets out the speaker's reaction to it. Like Isherwood, Larkin is wary of the possible pretentiousness of a dramatic break with everyday life, even as he is obviously attracted to the possibility of leaving behind the world of work and responsibility (a possibility he also explores in 'Toads', which appeared immediately before 'Poetry of Departures' in The Less Deceived). Larkin's repeated rereadings of *All the*

Conspirators must have made even small verbal details of the novel lodge in his memory, to be recalled – probably unconsciously – some time later. There are other echoes of Isherwood's novel in 'Poetry of Departures'. 'We all hate home' (10) recalls Philip's mother's remark that 'you don't like your home' (p. 51). The 'nut-strewn roads' (25) recall the 'lanes scattered with fir-cones and pine-needles' around a minor country house in the novel (p. 112). The 'specially-chosen junk' in the speaker's room perhaps recalls Isherwood's several evocative descriptions of the furniture and objects in Philip's house (e.g. p. 42). The poem thus recalls the novel both at the level of its subject matter and at the level of verbal echoes.

Over Christmas 1940, Larkin was pondering a short story. He promised J.B. Sutton that it would be 'Aldous Huxley of "Two or Three Graces" and "Those Barren Leaves" crossed with the Christopher Isherwood of "All the Conspirators" and "The Memorial"'. Larkin will officiate at the marriage' (p. 9). He planned to call one of the characters Christopher, as though repaying Isherwood for his novel about a character called Philip. The story came to nothing, but Isherwood's first novel, which Larkin admired so much, did reappear thirteen years later in 'Poetry of Departures'.

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